



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Harry A. Watson, Councilors Heather Sherman Bond, Kathryn M. Brown-Tracy, Catherine Kolnaski, Deborah B. Monteiro, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Rita M. Schmidt, Paulann H. Sheets, and James L. Streeter

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

7:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

REGULAR MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Watson called the meeting to order at 7:06 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Watson, Councilor Brown-Tracy, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter
Members Absent: Councilor Bond

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnyan.

3. Calendar and Communications

Councilor Sheets received a call from Bobby Jo Cini regarding the Mortimer Wright Preserve trail proposal.

Mayor Watson asked the Council if they want to have the regular meeting of the Committee of the Whole on December 23rd and the consensus was to cancel the meeting. It was noted that a special meeting can be held on December 30th if necessary.

Town Manager Oefinger reminded the Council that the regular meetings of the Town Council and Committee of the Whole will be held on Wednesday, November 5th and 12th, respectively, due to election day and Veterans Day occurring on the Tuesdays. November 12th is also an RTM meeting night, so the Town Manager suggested that the Committee of the Whole meeting be held at 6:00 p.m., with the Group meetings to follow.

4. Approval of Minutes

2008-0259 Approval of Minutes (Committee of the Whole)

RESOLUTION ACCEPTING COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MINUTES

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the Town Council Committee of the Whole meeting of October 14, 2008 are hereby accepted and approved.

A motion was made by Councilor Schmidt, seconded by Councilor Kolnaski, to adopt.

The motion carried unanimously

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None.

6. NEW BUSINESS

2008-0247 Budget Guidelines for FYE 2010

Recommended for a Resolution

Councilor O'Beirne noted that everyone is aware of the financial challenges today and the Town can not expect any additional revenues. He suggested that the Council request a zero dollar increase budget and analyses of the "add-ons" for a 1% and a 2% increase. His proposal would

not include the debt service. Councilor Streeter asked what the effect would be on contractual obligations. Councilor O'Beirne explained that his proposal would include labor contracts and may result in hiring freezes or employee reductions through attrition. Councilor O'Beirne would not support layoffs.

Councilor Monteiro would like to hear from the department heads what a zero dollar budget means in the way of cuts in addition to the exercise of identifying add-ons for a 1% and 2% increase. Councilor Kolnaski feels that issuing budget guidance is premature because union contract increases are typically about 3% and cost increases for things such as utilities are unknown. She would suggest starting with a 1% increase. Councilor Sheets supports the exercise and feels that starting early is valuable. She questioned the "baseline" figure for calculating the zero dollar increase and Councilor O'Beirne feels it should be the adopted budget figure, not anticipated expenditures. He further explained that the zero dollar increase would be across the board for Town Operations, not by individual department. Councilor O'Beirne feels that the Town Operations portion of the budget has a good history of returning money to the General Fund, unlike the Board of Education.

Councilor Schmidt suggested a 3% increase and feels that it is important not to tie the hands of government. Councilor O'Beirne feels that 3% is "business as usual" and does not take the current economic situation seriously. Councilor Schmidt clarified that she would like to see an analysis for 3% in addition to the 1% and 2% analyses, not a 3% increase.

Councilor Streeter feels that the CIP must be examined closely for cost saving opportunities.

The Town Manager provided an update on his efforts on the budget to date. Guidance from the Town Council is good, but it is not helpful to start at 0, 1, 2, or 3%. It would be more helpful for the Council to identify the things that they would like to eliminate. If the Town Manager and department heads proposed a zero dollar increase budget, there will be programs eliminated that the Council will not agree with. Despite what the public may think, the Town Manager does not propose eliminating services just to evoke a response. A zero dollar increase budget will result in the elimination of services so it would be more helpful to the Town Manager and department heads to have a discussion with the Council about which services the Council would like to eliminate. The Town Manager suggested starting with a level service budget and then identifying programs that the Council feels the Town can not afford.

The Town Manager has already talked to department heads about preliminary budget analyses and has asked major departments to go beyond a zero dollar increase into the negatives. Identifying a percentage cut is starting at the end and trying to work backwards. The Town Manager needs guidance identifying what programs or services the Council wants to eliminate because the types of reductions being discussed will not come about as a result of efficiencies.

Councilor O'Beirne does not think that Town Councilors know as much about department operations as the Town Manager thinks. He suggested that the Council could spend a day with each department head to look at every aspect of their budget. Town Manager Oefinger then suggested asking the department heads what they think they need to serve the community and then use that as a baseline for discussions. The Town Manager is concerned that he will come in with a budget that includes a lot of cuts, but not every Councilor will be on the same page, and then a lot of time will be spent piecing the budget back together.

Councilor Sheets feels that the Town Manager's proposal is reasonable, but these are not ordinary times. She agrees that Town Council does not understand the budget well enough to comment. However, she would suggest suspending computer and vehicle replacement across the board as well as travel and conferences.

Councilor Kolnaski feels that the Town Manager, the Board of Education and others understand we are in difficult times and she supports the Town Manager's suggestion.

Councilor Streeter noted that the state is freezing things such as hiring and overtime. He is not convinced that the Board of Education would go along with any such guidance.

Councilor O'Beirne feels the Town Council should identify what the Town can afford before the budget is prepared. The Town Manager agreed that the Town Council's role is to identify what the Town can afford, but he is proposing a different way to get there and he would like to have concurrence among Town Councilors before the budget goes to the printer.

Councilor Monteiro stated she can live with budgets based on what the needs are with the stipulations that the department heads recognize the difficult times that the Town is facing, that the budget proposals include a list of things that could be cut, and that the proposals are developed well in advance of the deadline for the budget.

A motion was made by Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., seconded by Councilor Sheets, to give the Town Manager, the Board of Education, the City of Groton, and Groton Long Point budget guidance requesting zero dollar increase budgets with analyses of 1%, 2%, and 3% above that.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Votes: In Favor: 5 - Councilor Brown-Tracy, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter

Opposed: 3 - Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski and Councilor Schmidt

2008-0235

Mortimer Wright Preserve Trail Proposal

Discussed

Many Councilors noted that they had received a phone call from Bobby Jo Cini, an adjacent property owner, expressing concerns with the proposal. The Town Manager distributed a map identifying adjacent property owners. Subsequent to Ms. Cini's telephone call, Councilor Streeter suggested to the Town Manager that the adjacent property owners be contacted to explain the project. The Town Manager reminded the Council that Dr. French offered to arrange a tour of the property.

Councilor Sheets outlined Ms. Cini's concerns as follows: horse manure on the trails and the potential impact on the wells of adjacent neighbors; the prospect of horses and bikers crossing Groton Long Point from Brook Street; and the use of Town equipment to assist a "private use" of the recreational space. Councilor Sheets noted that the parcel is open space and it is open to the public. She feels that horse owners have the same duty as dog owners to clean up after their animals. Councilor Sheets noted Ms. Cini's underlying misconception that there wouldn't be any contact with abutters. She agreed with the Town Manager that the Town does not need approval from the abutting property owners, but the Town should notify them of the proposal and seek their input.

Councilor Monteiro added that Ms. Cini is also concerned that there is ledge on the property. Councilor Monteiro would like to tour the property. The Town Manager agreed that the property is loaded with rock and ledge. All clearing, with the exception of the area at the street, will be done with hand tools. There will be no blasting or rock removal. The trails will just go around.

The Town Manager recommended that neighbors be invited to a session with Dr. French so that the concerns can be understood. The consensus of the Council was to have the meeting during a Committee of the Whole meeting.

2008-0248

2009 Rates for Shennecossett Golf Course

Discussed

Director of Parks and Recreation John Silsby noted that the rates for Shennecossett Golf Course

are considered each year by the Golf Advisory Board and the Parks and Recreation Commission. He described the process and history for setting the rates. The Parks and Recreation Commission is recommending a 3% increase that would impact all of the rates at the golf course. The increase will position the golf course to cover anticipated budget increases. Mr. Silsby noted that Shennecossett had a very successful financial season with a positive fund balance. The goal is to build a 10% fund balance to act as a cushion for bad years.

Councilor Streeter asked if the public is made aware of the recommended increases prior to the Town Council's review. Tim Castleberry, Chairman of the Golf Advisory Board, noted that he interacts with many of the players and he looks for feedback on the proposed increases. In this case, it was all positive feedback. Golf Pro Todd Goodhue added that the Pro Shop tells players about the proposed increases and all of the feedback was positive and the increase was termed "understandable." Mr. Goodhue attributed the season's success to the condition of the golf course and the rates are less than the competition. Also, the golf course has been doing a lot of e-marketing.

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Monteiro, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0260

Integrated Pavement Management Program

Discussed

Gary Schneider, Director of Public Works, explained that the Town utilizes a Pavement Management Program that rates roads and assigns a Pavement Condition Index (PCI) value. The Town Council directed staff to do the same analysis for the City of Groton and Groton Long Point. The Town's consultant, MACTEC Engineering and Consulting, recently completed those two studies and consolidated them with updated Town information.

Mr. Schneider provided a brief overview of the Pavement Management Program, which utilizes a database called Micropaver to develop an inventory. Test sections of every road are inspected and compared against a known standard, then run through a calculation to produce a PCI.

In summary, the Town budgets approximately \$600,000 for Town roads and the report recommends a budget of \$1,000,000 to clear a backlog and maintain a PCI of 70% on the majority of roads. A budget of \$1,300,000 would maintain the network at a PCI of 81%. In the City of Groton, the budget is approximately \$300,000 per year and the report recommends an increase to \$420,000 per year to remain above the 70% PCI. In Groton Long Point, the budget is \$117,000 and the report recommends that the funding level be maintained.

Mr. Schneider reviewed appropriations in the three previous budget years and explained there has been a 20% and a 31% increase in materials costs over those years.

Mayor Watson noted, and Councilor Streeter agreed, that they thought the projects would be considered across all three areas to determine priorities. Mr. Schneider noted that the roads can be sorted by PCI, but the worst roads will all be in Groton Long Point. The Town Manager explained that the whole premise of pavement management is not necessarily to do the worst roads while letting all the other roads deteriorate, but to triage the roads and apply funds where they will do the most good. Anything below 50% would be a major reconstruction. The idea is to spend the funds on roads around 70%.

The Town Manager indicated that a list of roads sorted by PCI would be provided to the Council.

The Town Manager summarized the information noting that the entire Town spends about \$1,000,000 per year; the report recommends spending approximately \$1.5 million to maintain the condition of the roads. If the Council wants to improve the overall condition and catch up on a

back log, the Town needs to spend \$1.9 million. The Pavement Management Program grades the roads, but then there has to be a judgment call made. There are not enough funds on an annual basis to take care of the worst roads. The decision to invest in a road is not just based on its final score, but on other factors such as anticipated development in the area.

2008-0246 Introduction of an Ordinance on Property Tax Relief

Discussed

Town Manager Oefinger noted that Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent worked on this ordinance with the Town Attorney. If the ordinance is acceptable, the next step is to introduce the ordinance and set a public hearing.

Councilor O'Beirne expressed concern that in at least four areas, this is not what the Council voted on. For example, residency requirement, income limits, and aggregation and cumulative limits.

The Assistant to the Town Manager noted that he gave the Town Attorney the Town of Durham ordinance to work with and neglected to pass on the provisions approved by the Committee of the Whole. With respect to residency, the Town Attorney still has reservations about any requirement beyond one year.

Consideration of this item was tabled to the next meeting.

2008-0263 Resolution Setting Public Hearing on Ordinance on Property Tax Relief

Not Discussed

2008-0015 Water Use Restriction Ordinance

Discussed

The consensus of the Council was to invite Aquarion and Groton Utilities to a future meeting to make a presentation on the proposed ordinance.

2008-0261 Updating of Land Use Regulations - Update

Discussed

The Town Manager noted there will be a public information meeting on Wednesday, October 29th at 6:00 p.m. on the findings of the consultant for the Land Use Regulation Update project.

2008-0264 Revised State Grant - Tercentennial Legacy Playground

Discussed

Town Manager Oefinger explained that the State of Connecticut made an error in the amount of the grant and it has been revised from \$50,000 to \$40,000.

A motion was made by Councilor Sheets, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0122 Joint Meeting with the Stonington Board of Selectmen

Discussed

The joint meeting will be held on December 10th at 6:00 p.m. in Stonington. One item for discussion is Stonington's request to utilize Town forces for vehicle maintenance.

2008-0265 Board of Education Storage Needs

Discussed

Mayor Watson received a letter from the Board of Education. The letter notes that the Board of Education would no longer need William Seely School if they had a storage facility for supplies. The Town Manager feels it would be appropriate to have a discussion in executive session as to what direction to go with William Seely. The Town Manager receives many inquiries from

developers on the property, which is adjacent to a vacant commercial property with significant frontage. The Council could also talk about Colonel Ledyard School in executive session. The issue there is determining the value of the school, tempered by the budget support provided by the City of Groton.

7. Consideration of Committee Referral Items as per Town Council Referral List

None.

8. OTHER BUSINESS

Town Manager Oefinger received a request from a representative of Eastern Connecticut Realtors who would like to do a half hour presentation for the Town Council on housing opportunities. The Town Council agreed to the request.

9. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Sheets, to adjourn the meeting at 9:22 p.m.